**Transcript of Opening Remarks delivered by Mr Tan Kiat How,
Senior Minister of State,
Ministry of Communications and Information,
at NCS & ITE Partnership on Internship & Industry Attachment Opportunities (10 May 2024)**

Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen

1.   Good morning.

2.   Very happy to join all of you here to witness the MOU Signing between NCS and ITE.

3.   I am heartened that industry partners like NCS are taking steps to provide more developmental and career pathways for our ITE and Polytechnic graduates.

4.   The growth in the digital economy has led to strong demand for tech talent both globally and locally.

5.   According to IMDA's Singapore Digital Economy Report published in October last year, Singapore's Digital Economy amounted to S$106 billion in 2022, equivalent to 17.3% of Singapore's GDP, which is an increase from 13% in 2017. So, it's a growing sector contributing to our economy and becoming a very important engine for Singapore's growth.

6.   And the expansion of the digital economy is on the back of increasing adoption of digital technologies by enterprises, which has in turn contributed to the robust growth of tech manpower.

7.   In Singapore, the number of tech professionals has also increased from around 155,500 in 2017 to 201,100 in 2022 driven by demand across all sectors. This has translated to good jobs, higher salaries, and better career prospects for local tech professionals, which account for more than 70% of overall tech jobs.

8.   Tech professionals have enjoyed steady growth in their median wages from $5,512 in 2017 to $7,376 in 2022.

9.   Similarly, our Information and Digital Technologies (IDT) fresh graduates have good starting pay, with University IDT graduates taking home the highest median gross salary at $5,500 in 2023. This is compared to $2,900 for IDT Polytechnic graduates in 2023 and $1,900 for ICT ITE graduates in 2022.

10.   While the difference in wages for fresh graduates across the Institutes of Higher Learning (IHL) can reflect varying competencies required for the job role, there can be greater consideration of skills at the point of hire as well as throughout the individual's career.

11.   As 1 in 2 IDT IHL graduates are from ITE and Polytechnics, MCI looked into this matter with our IHL leadership. We have made three observations after consulting employers, graduates and then-students at the ITEs and Polytechnics.

12.   Firstly, companies are overly focused on academic qualifications as the main, and sometimes only indicator of competency. Many jobs put degree as a pre-requisite. However, upon
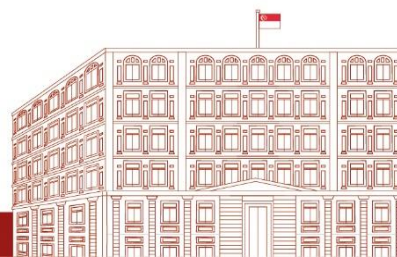
closer analysis, not all such jobs require a degree and there are more suitable ways to assess fit and competence for the role.

13.   Secondly, employers feedback that graduates may not have sufficient industry-relevant skills and experience – this is especially important in a fast-moving industry like tech.

14.   Finally, we discovered that there are insufficient options and structured pathways for ITE and Polytechnic graduates to develop their careers in the industry. It is not just about the point of time when you enter the workforce, but it is what you do in the job throughout your career – reskilling and upskilling yourself – keeping pace to technological advances and keeping yourself relevant to the needs of that time.

15.   In the spirit of Forward Singapore, we should take a broader and more inclusive approach recognising that each of us have different talents and will grow at a different pace. It is more important for employers to recognise a person's skills, attitude and willingness to learn over their academic qualifications.

16.   I'm not saying that academic qualifications are not important, but there are other considerations as well, and employers should consider employees' potential to grow over time, rather than measure competence at a snapshot in time. Therefore, employers should empower and support their employees to upskill themselves throughout their careers, and recognise experience acquired on the job.

17.   Having made the three observations that I mentioned earlier, the next question is: so what do we do about it? In Singapore, we take action and we work together in partnership to make a difference.

18.   We started Tech Skills Accelerator (TESA) for ITE and Polytechnics Alliance, or TIP Alliance, in 2022 to bring together like-minded partners – school leadership, tech industry associations and leading employers of tech manpower to come together to drive change and make an impact.

19.   Together, we launched the Skills-Based Hiring Movement, which includes a handbook providing practical guidance for firms to attract, assess and develop tech talent based on competencies. Leading tech employers in the TIP Alliance have committed 800 good job opportunities for ITE and Polytechnic graduates.

20.   Since then, we have made good progress in encouraging skills-based hiring in Singapore and creating opportunities for Polytechnic and ITE students in the tech sector.

21.   NCS is one of 210 employers in Singapore that have signed a pledge in support of skills-based hiring. Today, I am very heartened that NCS prioritises skills and practical experience beyond academic qualifications in their talent attraction and competency development. For example, when hiring new employees, NCS' job postings highlight necessary skills over academic qualifications, and NCS uses technical assessments and project-based evaluations to assess prospective employees.

22.   For our students, it is also important that we support them in picking up industry-relevant skills. One avenue to do so is via internships, so that our students can acquire practical skills through job shadowing or engaging in industry projects. Thus, as part of the TIP Alliance efforts, we have worked with Polytechnics and ITEs to extend internship durations from 6 to 12 months. In 2023, more than 400 Polytechnic and ITE students undertook year-long internships to gain more industry experience.
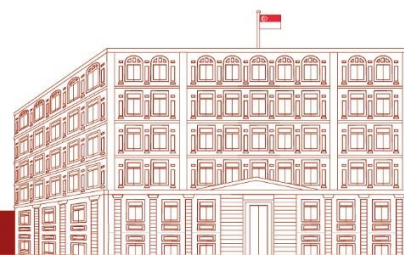
23.   As a member of the TIP Alliance, NCS' MOU with ITE is a good example of how industry and academia can work together to make a difference. Over the next 3 years, I am very glad that NCS will offer more tech internship and industry attachment opportunities to ITE students, comprising both 6- and 12-month internships. This means that many more Infocomm and Media (ICM) ITE students will be able to gain practical industry experience while studying.

24.   Upon completion of the internship, students may be offered a full-time job opportunity with NCS. There, they are encouraged to participate in NCS' Ignite work-study programme which hires and trains ITE graduates in Infrastructure or software development while they are enrolled in a diploma course from one of Singapore's ITE colleges or Polytechnics.

25.   Noor Nabilah is a beneficiary of NCS' Ignite work-study programme. In 2019, Nabilah interned with NCS for 5 months before she was hired by NCS as an operations support executive. She is currently pursuing a work-study diploma in Cloud Management and Operations at ITE East. Nabilah is a firm believer that challenging yourself is the only path that leads to growth. We will hear more from Nabilah and her peers later today and I hope that it inspires all our ITE students to seek continuous growth throughout your careers.

26.   On top of enhanced internships for ITE students, NCS will also be providing capability development opportunities for ITE staff and work with the ITEs on knowledge sharing, and curriculum development.

27.   Let me conclude by thanking ITE and progressive companies like NCS in playing an active role in supporting our students in their education and careers. It is important for students to pick up industry-relevant skills during your education in school, but also very important for you to get your hands dirty, understand what it means to work on new project, work in teams, and what does it mean to lead teams. Opportunities are not just in Singapore, and digital opportunities are around the world, especially in our region where Southeast Asia is the fastest growing internet economy in the world.

28.   For Singapore students, I think we have a unique value proposition – right skills, right attitude and more importantly, we are trusted to deliver on what we promise. So the opportunities are bright, especially for all of you students who are sitting in the audience. I wish you all the best and let's seize those opportunities that comes your way. As long as we continue to upskill and reskill ourselves for development, there will always be good opportunities, good jobs, good salaries and good career prospects. So work hard, but always invest in yourself and improve yourself.

29.   Thank you very much.